



MAKING IT STICK

**Your PowerPoint is a snooze.
Your ideas are lame.
But all is not lost.**

By Justin Ewers



It seems to happen every day. A meeting is called to outline a new strategy or sales plan. Down go the lights and up goes the PowerPoint. Strange phrases appear—"unlocking shareholder value," "technology-focused innovation," "maximizing utility." (What does that mean?) Lists of numbers come and go. Bullet point by bullet point, the company's goals float across the screen. Eyes glaze over.

Some ideas have longer shelf lives than others. Nike said "Just do it," and people did. James Carville insisted the 1992 presidential election was about the economy, stupid, and politicians still talk about it. John F. Kennedy announced that the U.S. would put a man on the moon in under ten years—and it happened. Most managers can't get their employees to remember the salient points of their last presentation.

In *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, brothers Chip and Dan Heath aim to change that. Chip, a professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and Dan, a consultant at Duke Corporate Education, argue that great ideas are made, not born—and that businesses can drastically improve their messages. Drawing on the work of psychologists, education researchers, and political scientists, the Heaths identify six traits they think all great ideas—from urban legends to public policy to product design—have in common. Call it the tipping point for the *How to Win Friends and Influence People* set. The Heaths' own big idea is already generating business school buzz. We spoke with the authors about the six things managers can do to tap into their inner JFK—and keep employees awake.

SIMPLICITY

First things first, the Heaths insist: Drop the PowerPoint. “PowerPoint is like kryptonite for stickiness,” says Dan. It may seem like a simple way to get information out into a big room, but for too many people, PowerPoint has become a crutch: Clicking away at their keyboards, speakers don’t have to do the essential work of tailoring their message to their audience. “Business managers seem to believe that, once they’ve clicked through a PowerPoint, they’ve successfully communicated their ideas,” write the authors. “What they’ve done is share data.”

The Heaths call this the “Curse of Knowledge.” The more executives understand a concept, the harder it can be to explain. Execs who use the phrase “maximizing shareholder value” may know what they mean when they say it, but employees have no idea how it applies to their everyday work.

The Heaths’ solution: Managers need to spend more time simplifying their messages. “This is the hardest step,” says Chip, “taking your idea and distilling it down, whittling away everything that’s not essential.” One reason Southwest Airlines has enjoyed over 30 years of profitability, the authors contend, is its founders’ willingness to winnow the company’s mission down to a meaningful mantra: Southwest is “THE low-fare airline.” When tempted to expand the business over the years—marketing once suggested the airline should offer chicken salads on some flights—Herb Kelleher, the cofounder and onetime CEO, responded with a question: Would chicken salads help Southwest be “THE low-fare airline?” The answer, of course, was no.

UNEXPECTEDNESS

The old saw about the importance of telling a joke before starting a speech has some truth to it. Surprise works. It puts listeners at ease and makes them more receptive to ideas. Eventually, though, workers go back to their jobs and presentations are forgotten.

So how can managers make their ideas—and not just their jokes—last? The best companies, the Heaths say, find ways to maintain surprise even after meetings are over. Take Nordstrom, the upscale department store—an organization, as Chip puts it, “that’s going to charge you a lot of money but that’s really going to blow your mind with customer service.” To get employees to buy into the Nordstrom model, the company doesn’t just hold meetings telling floor workers to smile, or use abstract phrases like “world-class customer service.”

What Nordstrom does, instead, is spread motivational stories about “Nordies,” floor employees who have gone above and beyond the call of duty in serving customers. Tales like the Nordie who ironed a shirt so a customer could use it in a meeting; the Nordie who warmed up customers’ cars while they shopped; or the Nordie who wrapped gifts customers had purchased at Macy’s. PowerPoints end, says Dan: “An unexpected story has a chance of living on.”

CONCRETENESS

There is a reason so many managers can be so hard to understand. “We’ve just had it pounded into our heads that the way you seem smart is by using numbers and being abstract,” says Dan. Before developing a new product, managers tend to err on the side of vagueness, keeping their options open and hoping for the best. This is not wise, the Heaths argue. When they speak in abstractions, workers may *seem* like they understand each other, but, ultimately, the truth comes out. If employees don’t get the concept, the product won’t launch on time. Managers who choose to embrace every idea end up with none.

Coming up with big, hairy, audacious goals isn’t easy, but done right, the Heaths say, it can lead to products—and ideas—that last. When executives at Boeing began working on the 727, their next-generation passenger plane, in the 1960s, they faced the ultimate business challenge: how to get thousands of far-flung engineers moving in the same direction? “A typical business organization would have said, ‘We’re going to dominate the short-haul passenger market for jets,’” says Chip.

Boeing execs, though, were far more specific: Their new plane, they said, not only would seat 131 passengers—a large number at the time—but it would be able to fly nonstop from Miami to New York City and, most important, land on runway 4-22 at LaGuardia, which, at less than a mile long, was too short for large planes. The concrete goal gave engineers the flexibility to be creative, while keeping everyone in the sprawling organization on the same page. The Boeing 727 went on to become the bestselling airliner of its time.

CREDIBILITY

When the surgeon general talks about smoking or a Supreme Court justice weighs in on the law, people listen. The experts never worry about their ideas being ignored. But what about the rest of us? Most people don’t have a bully pulpit. And while many businesses seek out the obvious solution—getting someone famous to endorse a product—there are only so many shoes and shampoos Michael Jordan and Oprah can’t live without.

Still, there are other, equally effective ways to demonstrate credibility, the Heaths say. Take Safexpress, a FedEx-style shipping company based in India. Safexpress promises its customers safe, on-time delivery of their packages, and since its founding in 1995, it has grown by leaps and bounds. But when Rubal Jain, a member of the company’s founding family, sought out the business of a major Bollywood studio recently, the moviemakers balked at working with a company in piracy-riddled India. Jain needed credibility—and fast.

Instead of using data to make his case, though—pointing out, for example, that more than 98 percent of Safexpress’s deliveries arrive on time—Jain found a better way. He told the Bollywood executive he was negotiating with the story of how Safexpress, in 2003, had safely distributed the latest *Harry Potter* novel in India—an incredibly complex process that involved deliver-

ing nearly 69,000 copies into bookstores all over the country at precisely 8:00 a.m. on the morning of the release. Jain also knew, based on an earlier conversation, that the exec's brother had just completed his high school board exams—which, Jain told him, Safexpress had delivered on time as well. “Now, *that's* sticky!” says Dan. The combination of the two stories was far more compelling than any number Jain could have used. It certainly convinced the studio. The deal was signed in two months.

EMOTION

Making an idea compelling is one thing. Getting someone to act on it is another. Once again, though, the Heaths say, too many managers blindly push their charts or graphs when making employees *feel* something is much more likely to inspire action. They point to a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2002 that demonstrated just how much an emotional appeal can trump one based on hard facts.

In the study, researchers looked at how more than 10,000 teenagers responded to two different antismoking TV commercials—the emotion-based “Truth” campaign, which featured teens piling up body bags outside the offices of a Big Tobacco company, and an analytical, fact-based series of ads sponsored by Philip Morris called “Think. Don’t Smoke.” The researchers weren’t surprised to find that the emotional ads were more memorable: 22 percent of teens recalled seeing the “Truth” commercials while only 3 percent remembered the “Think” spots. But they were shocked by how much more the emotional ads motivated teens to take action. After seeing the “Truth” ads, 66 percent of viewers said they were less likely to smoke. The “Think” teens, meanwhile, said they were 36 percent *more* likely to smoke.


There is a reason that politicians use emotional, negative campaign ads and that charities seek donations with touching stories of a suffering child, says Dan: “Emotion sparks action.”

STORIES

If there is one piece of advice the Heaths have for managers struggling to breathe life into their ideas, it is this: Tell a story. For the past five years, Chip has been running a simulation in a class he teaches at Stanford called “Making Ideas Stick” that demonstrates how much the average business presentation fails to live up to a well-told tale. After giving a class of M.B.A. students detailed numbers on U.S. property crime

rates, Chip asks them to make impromptu, 60-second speeches for or against tougher crime laws. Under pressure, the students fall into the same trap most speakers do: The typical student uses 2.5 statistics in a one-minute talk. Only 1 in 10 tells a story.

Chip then distracts the class for 10 minutes by showing a clip of a *Monty Python* movie. When it's over, he asks the students what they remember about the presentations. “There's this kind of nervous laughter that goes around the room,” says Chip. Only 1 out of every 20 people in the class is able to recall any individual number from any of the presentations they heard. When the speaker told a story, on the other hand, about a personal experience with property crime, two out of three students remembered. “You can take the moral out of a story, but you can't reconstruct the story out of the moral,” says Dan.

Stories may not fit neatly into a spreadsheet or a PowerPoint, but the more managers rely on narratives—instead of charts and graphs—to share their ideas, the less sleep the rest of us will be getting in their meetings. 

This article, written by Justin Ewers, first appeared in *U.S. News and World Report* and was adapted for *Facilities Manager*. Chip and Dan Heath are keynote speakers at the APPA 2009 conference in Vancouver, BC.

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